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### Research Paper

## Language Use and Group Dynamics: Observations from a Project-Oriented CALL Classroom

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between students' language use and group dynamics in a Chinese project-oriented CALL (PrOCALL) classroom. The study reveals that PrOCALL does not necessarily create more target language use and that L1 performs multiple functions through descriptive statistics and fine-grained microanalysis of group interaction. The results also highlight how group dynamics develop and evolve. From a sociocultural perspective, the study demonstrates the first language can be a powerful tool in boosting the potential for collaborative language learning. This paper argues for the need for more qualitative study on interaction at the computer.

**Keywords:** Peer-peer Interaction, Sociocultural Perspective, PrOCALL, Collaborative Language Learning, Secondary Classroom, EFL, Group Dynamic

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### 1. Introduction

The potential affordances of technologies in learning are widely documented and supported by both the socio-cognitive and sociocultural schools of thought for their facilitation of language use and opportunities for collaboration. In this context, and inspired by project-based learning, project-oriented CALL (PrOCALL) has become one of the ways to enhance peer

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interaction and collaboration in foreign language teaching through project identification, planning, management and production (e.g., Gu, 2002; Jeon-Ellis et al., 2005). As such, ProCALL develops students' communication and interpersonal competencies and offers opportunities for students to produce language and control their discourse production, thus improving "fluency and the ability to interact spontaneously in a less formal setting" (Ewing, 2000, p. 354). In a Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) tertiary context, Gu (2002) asserted that a cross-cultural collaborative online writing project enabled students to take more responsibility for their learning and increased language use. In a French-language context, Jeon-Ellis et al. (2005) found that the relationships between participants in their ProCALL projects had a profound impact on generating learning opportunities to use the target language (TL) for each student. Meskill (2005) has also found that groups of students around a computer, where one student assumes the role of a more capable peer, can provide *triadic scaffolds* (Meskill, 2005). This body of research has collectively offered us insights into the benefits of ProCALL in foreign language learning at the tertiary level. Nevertheless, little research has been carried out in EFL secondary or primary classrooms where language learning is a compulsory and core subject (e.g., in China). In this respect, Gánem-Gutiérrez (2009) suggests that research on face-to-face collaboration at the computer in the foreign language classroom is necessary if we are to understand both powerful tools: the computer and language-in-collaboration. Equally, Li (2014) calls for a more detailed analysis of classroom practice when technology is used to enhance learning to understand the full potential of technology, as well as pedagogical considerations. Against this background, this paper aims to reveal insights into the process of collaborative project work supported by technology in a small group, focusing on language use and group dynamics. This research will fill in the

gap of the use of technology to facilitate learning in collaborative work in a formal instructed environment and contribute to existing research from a sociocultural perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Sociocultural Perspective

The sociocultural perspective views learning as constructing meaning about the world through negotiation and "collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Central to sociocultural theory (SCT hereafter) is mediation, which represents the use of tools to solve a problem or reach a goal, as "human consciousness is fundamentally a mediated mental activity" (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 7). In this view, humans direct and organise their mental activity such as thinking, learning, solving problems or constructing knowledge, first at a social level, then internalise it at an individual psychological level. In other words, learning is an internalising process of socially constructed knowledge through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000). Haas (1996) extends Vygotsky's idea of language as a psychological tool and proposes that technology is a new psychological tool that can mediate the interaction between humans and their environment. William & Burden (2009) further indicate that *mediators* can also be people who play an important role in enhancing children's learning "by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them" (p. 40). In this sense, learners interact with others (teachers and peers in classrooms) who have different levels of skills or knowledge, which often lead to effective learning. This process is closely related to another essence of SCT, scaffolding when the knowledgeable participant creates a supportive condition in social interaction to *scaffold* a novice to reach higher levels of competence. Donato (1994) argues that "scaffolding occurs routinely as students work together on language learning tasks" and therefore, learners themselves should be

considered as a "source of knowledge in a social context" (pp. 51-52). As such, interaction in collaborative work between learners may be viewed as scaffolded help offered to each other in different aspects (e.g. linguistic, social, intercultural etc.) and is a dialogue in which knowledge is co-constructed. By interacting with peers and supporting each other, learners "...can collaboratively manage a task that would be beyond any of them acting as individuals" (Ellis, 1999, p.19). This process is one form of development within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In language learning, ZPD can be defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development as determined through language produced collaboratively with a teacher or peer" (Ohta, 2001, p. 9). The concept of ZPD presupposes an interaction and collaboration between a more competent person and a less competent person on a task. It focuses on the *development* (in linguistic or other aspects) that the less competent person achieves independently in future tasks. However, "peers working within the ZPD of each other can support learning through, for example, questioning, proposing possible solutions, disagreeing, repeating, and managing activities and behaviours (social and cognitive)" (Swain, et al., 2002, p.173).

## 2.2 Collaborative Talk and L1 Use

Swain (2000) proposed the concept of *collaborative dialogue* in which "speakers are engaged in problem-solving and knowledge building" (p. 102). She explained that collaborative dialogue is a process in which "language use and language learning can co-occur. It is language use mediating language learning. It is cognitive activities and it is social activities" (Swain, 2000, p. 97). Through collaborative dialogue, participants mediate their mental activities and act as experts to scaffold each other in learning. Learning is therefore seen as a mediated process where language is used as a primary

mediating tool in enabling information exchange, knowledge sharing and constructing. Language learning is thus embedded in, and emerging from, the collaboration between peers and the context, the interactive environment in which the language is used and the artefacts they construct (Ohta, 2001; Lantolf, 2002).

Swain (2000) pointed out that the analysis of collaborative dialogue gives researchers access to the second language learning process in action. Collaborative dialogues can provide learning opportunities for second language development in the areas of: (1) noticing (2) testing hypotheses, (3) exploring unknown language, (4) facilitating understanding, and (5) co-constructing language or linguistic knowledge (Swain, 2000, 2005; Lapkin et al., 2002). In such collaborative talk, the use of L1 has proved to be a very effective mediational mechanism (see Shin et al., 2020 for a review. Also see DiCamilla & Antón, 2012 for a review). In Gánem-Gutiérrez's (2009) study, L1 was an effective tool for the collaborative enterprise that facilitated the provision of help without losing focus on the task goal, conveying the meaning of the words and providing the required assistance. Zhang (2019) argued that L1 facilitates lexico-grammatical understanding in a collaborative task. Overall, the use of L1 can provide scaffolded help as a private speech to aid internalization of the target language (Ohta, 2001; Jiménez Jiménez, 2015), regulate learning when students encounter cognitive or language problems (De Guerrero, 2018), and manage the task (Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez Jiménez, 2004). Researchers have also argued that second language learners have good psychological reason to use L1, especially for management and metalinguistic purposes (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2009; Gánem-Gutiérrez & Roehr, 2011). Although teachers encourage students to use the target language in many foreign language classrooms, L1 remains an important tool for learners to

talk about language. For example, the L1 is often the medium of metalinguistic input, particularly in collaborative tasks; for example, L1 can facilitate and even enable the accomplishment of tasks (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Lee, 2008; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). *Translanguaging* has been theorized as the complex and dynamic language practices to enable learners to use their language repertoire freely and purposively (García & Li, 2014). As such, scholars believe that *translanguaging pedagogy* in L2 learning enables students' full participation in knowledge co-making (García & Lin, 2017). Clearly, the use of L1 is linked to the task type (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015), target language proficiency (Dao & McDonough, 2017) and instructional settings (García Mayo & Ángeles Hidalgo, 2017; Vázquez & Ordóñez, 2019).

Collaborative talk centres on how learners assist each other in language learning tasks (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Although it is widely accepted that the more proficient learner can help the less proficient learner in a form-focused procedure (Ohta, 2000), scaffolding is a joint reciprocal task that demands collaborative effort (Lee, 2004). The expert and novice must maintain an intersubjectivity that facilitates participants to establish common goals (DeGuerrero & Villamil, 2000; Darhower, 2002). Lee (2008), from an extended sociocultural perspective, views experts in peer discussion less as authority figures and more as peers who are concurrently experts and novices when acquisition occurs *in* interaction, not *as* a result of interaction in ZPD (Swain, 2000; Swain et al., 2002, p. 173 original emphasis).

Closely related to collaborative dialogue is the concept of meaningful tasks with clear directions and a specific objective. In this paper, I define the task as an activity focusing on the *goal-oriented and communicative* dimensions. That requires learners to engage in meaningful exchanges with peers and draw upon resources of their choice to complete an authentic task.

By adapting and using linguistic and extralinguistic resources, learners create learning opportunities (Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Walsh & Li, 2013; Zhang Waring, 2011). ProCALL, therefore, has the potential to create opportunities for learning potentials (Egbert & Yang, 2004; Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2010), where students can “co-construct, and act on emergent and student-selected objects of learning” (Kunitz, 2018, p. 64). In this process, learners use and adapt linguistic and semiotic resources to complete the task jointly.

### **3. The Study**

#### **3.1 A Chinese ProCALL Classroom**

As part of a teaching innovation initiative, a ProCALL approach was employed with a class of 26 Senior One students (14-15 years old) in a Chinese secondary school. All students had been studying English as a compulsory course for five years, and their average level (as estimated by their teachers) was equivalent to lower-intermediate. However, a few students had reached the intermediate level. The duration of the initiative was 18 weeks, with one 45-minute ProCALL session each week. The sessions were located in a collaborative technology classroom where students sat around tables in self-selected groups of three or four, with a computer for each of them. In addition to the ProCALL classes, students had four sessions focusing on grammar, vocabulary and language skills every week. The project aimed to engage students in collaborative group work in which they researched topics according to their interests and then published their work using technological tools of their own choice to a broader audience on the School's Intranet. The project required research and writing components, and the students were encouraged to use the internet as a research tool but could also refer to more traditional resources, such as libraries. For these students, almost every aspect of the ProCALL process was new. It differed

from their typical day-to-day classroom experience in, for example, the flexible curriculum, the decentring of the teacher (Debski, 1997), the physical classroom layout, the freedom in the choice of activity, and the extensive use of technologies (Lewis & Atzert, 2000). The ProCALL pedagogy was designed on language learning principles and guidelines suggested in the literature (e.g. Debski, 2000; Jeon-Ellis et al., 2005). Each group was required to complete four to five projects around the topic suggested by the teacher. Below are the principles that were used to guide the design of the project:

- The target language is used as a tool for negotiation and collaboration
- Projects are personally meaningful and motivating
- Students jointly decide the focus of the project
- Students choose the format to present the final project product

This paper reports two groups of three students. These groups were chosen purposively because they used more target language than other groups, and they contained learners with different proficiency levels in English and technology. Their background information is provided in Table 1 (names are all pseudonyms). Group A established their group based on social relationships (friends) consisting of Wen, Yan and Gong. Wen and Gong shared the same interest in music, and Yan, and Wen had known each other since Year 1 (age 7). Group B consisted of Liang, Jin and Na, who sat together in their class. Na was one of the most proficient English language speakers in the class, and she had achieved a high level of linguistic and cultural awareness due to her overseas experience. Liang was a member of the Intelligent Robert club (which was led by an IT instructor) in the school.



**Table 1**  
*Participants background information*

Group	Participants	Self-rated English knowledge and skills					Academic result range (out of 100)	Experience in project work	Technology skills and knowledge	Experience in technology- supported learning
		listening	speaking	reading	writing	culture				
A	Wen (female)	V good	Good	V good	good	Poor	82-90	Yes	Poor	No
	Yan (female)	fair	fair	Good	Good	Poor	80-90	No	Fair	No
	Gong (male)	fair	fair	Good	fair	Good	75-87	No	Good	No
B	Na (female)	Good	V good	V Good	V good	Good	88-95	Yes	Fair	No
	Liang (male)	poor	poor	Fair	fair	fair	65-75	No	V Good	Yes software
	Jin (female)	Fair	Fair	Good	Good	fair	80-85	No	fair	No

### 3.2 Data Source

The data for the music project were collected over four weeks towards the end of the 18-week period when the group dynamic was well developed, and the work could be expected to be proceeding in a more focused manner than at the beginning. In addition, students were more comfortable with the video camera recording them – this is very important as some students might not be at ease at the beginning of the project. The students had been meeting for 45 minutes per week and had worked consistently in the same group. Various data were collected, including video recordings of the group interactions and computer screens examples of the project outcomes, and student questionnaires about their learning experience. Consent was sought from the headmaster, the teacher, and students of video recordings, screenshots, and other materials collected for the project. This paper uses interactional data, comprising 190 and 164 minutes for Group A and B, respectively.

### 3.3 Analysis

The videotaped recordings of the interactions were transcribed in full (See Appendix A for transcription conventions) and classified into three types of

episodes: on-task, about-task and off-task (See Table 2). Analysis was carried out by the author and checked by other researchers with expertise in Chinese classroom interaction. The data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, descriptive statistics (percentages) were used to illustrate the types of talk for each group and the use of L1 and the target language. Second, eight episodes were analysed further to gain insights into the nature of the collaborative relationship and the use of L1.

**Table 2***Types of episodes*

On task talk	Interactions semantically related in topic or purpose to the project/task (as in ProCALL this might be language-related, content-related or technology-related utterances). An on-task episode may be interrupted and continued later in the course of the interaction.
About task talk	Participants talk about task procedures or project management. These interactions are about the task or project they carry out.
Off task talk	Participants talk about project-unrelated aspects of their lives.

**4. Findings**

Descriptive statistics suggest the groups demonstrate similar interactional patterns (Figure 2). On-task episodes dominate in both groups, accounting for 70.7% and 62.0%. About-task episodes account for 16.3% and 21.3%, respectively, while off-task episodes are the lowest: 13.0% in Group A and 16.7% in Group B. A high level of on-task discussion suggests that students were focused on the project despite the lack of instructor supervision.

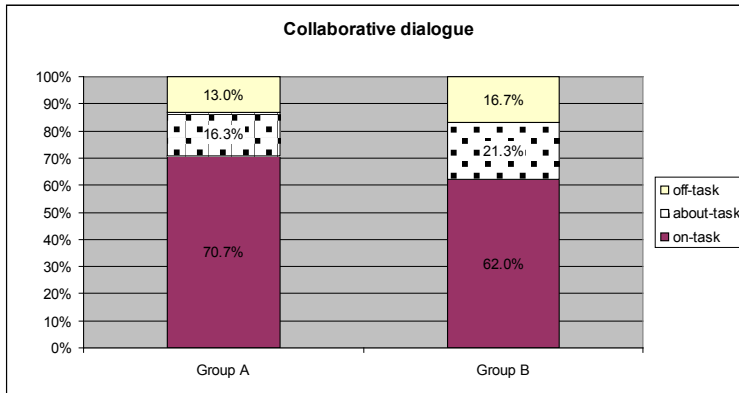


Figure 2. Collaborative dialogue distribution for Group A and B

Language-focussed moments are evidenced throughout their conversation, and the most distinctive peer support is at the lexical level. The percentage of L1 and TL use were 58.8% and 41.2% for Group A, and 55.3% and 44.7% for Group B. The statistics suggest that ProCALL does help students engage in collaborative talk but not necessarily leads to more TL use.

#### 4.1 On-task talk

The above-mentioned concepts of on-task collaborative dialogue may be operationalised as language-related talk (LRT), content-related talk (CRT) and technology-related talk (TRT). Extending the definition on language-related episodes (LREs) by Lapkin et al. (2002), LRT is defined as “any parts of the dialogue where learners talk about the language they are producing” or have produced, question or reflect on “their language use, or correct themselves or others” (p. 489). CRT is defined as talk where learners discuss the content of the project. TRT refers to the conversation in which participants discuss how to use technology. Analysis shows that LRT dominated the on-task collaborative dialogue, accounting for 44.8% and

50.7%, respectively, for Group A and B. The corresponding figures were 36.8% and 32.8% for CRT and 18.4% and 16.4% for TRT for Groups A and B, respectively (Figure 3). Most of the students' on-task talk was content- or language-related, while technology-related talk took up the least part of the group dialogues.

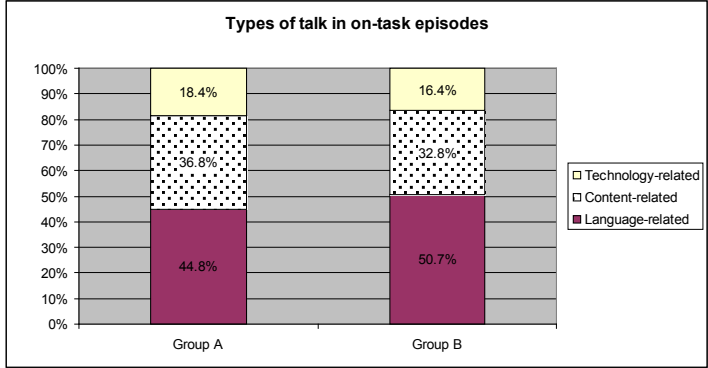


Figure 3. Different types of talk in on-task episodes

- Extract 1 (LRT)
- 17 Yan ((pointing at the screen)) He calls King of Pop?  
18 Gong Yes  
19 Yan *shen me yi si* (0.6) he CALLS King of Pop?  
(What do you mean?)  
20 Gong um (.) *wo de yi si shi shuo* (.) he is (.)  
(I mean)  
21 Yan Oh (.) *ni shi xiang shuo ta shi liu xing ying yue wang* (.) *shi me?*  
(Do you want to say he is King of Pop?)  
22 Gong *dui*  
(yes)  
23 Yan it's wrong (1.2) he um (.) IS called King of Pop (.) you are called Gong (.) I am called  
24 Yan so he IS [called  
25 Gong [Called (.) Oh he is called King of Pop (.) so somebody is called (.)  
26 *wo gei ji xia lai*  
(let me write this down)  
27 Yan Ok ((she moves closer to the screen and corrects his PPT)) (3.2)  
28 he (.) is (.) called (.) the uh no the King of Pop (1.2) *deng wen hui lai wen ta yi xia*  
(let's ask Wen when she is back)

Extract 1 provides an example of typical language-related talk. It records a section of Group A's dialogue on the students' chosen focus, Michael Jackson and his music. In the extract, Yan is checking Gong's PPT slides and facilitating Gong to use the correct sentence structure by making implicit corrective feedback by questioning (line 17), requesting clarification (line

19), hypothesising (line 21) and providing explicit corrective feedback (line 23). It seems that Yan's clarification request facilitates Gong's noticing, which further helps him generate self-repair (line 20). Note that after Yan explicitly explains grammar rules (line 23/24), Gong repeats. This is usually treated as a spontaneous response to the interlocutor, but linguistically, this could also be treated as a 'recast' (Kasper, 2004), a rephrasing or reformulation of all or part of the erroneous utterance. This may contrast with the learner's utterances phonologically, morphologically, syntactically or semantically while still maintaining its central meaning (Ohta, 2001). The language focus also shows when Yan corrects Gong's mistake, she refers to Wen as a language expert (line 28) as she is unsure about the usage of *the*. As second language speakers in an instructed environment, students inevitably check their language forms constantly. It is worth noting that both Yan and Gong choose their L1 as the communicative tool, and they only use TL when dealing with the linguistic problem, a grammar rule in this case (lines 17, 19, 23-26). In this extract, L1 is used for many purposes, for example: requesting and providing clarification (lines 19, 20) and confirmation (lines 21, 22), private speech (lines 25-26) and managing the task (line 28). It seems that the students are not comfortable using English for communicative purposes apart from dealing with linguistic-related problems. Again, this might be associated with their linguistic awareness and their views of learning a foreign language. However, a closer analysis of language choice also shows that the second speaker (Gong) tends to respond in the language the first speaker (Yan) chooses (for example, in lines 17/ 18; in lines 21/22). Note that in line 19, Yan asks the question in her L1 first and repeats the written text on the slide in English. Gong then responds to the first question in L1 and switches to English for the second part. To keep the same language choice

could be understood as engaging in the dialogue using the same mediation tool rather than simply following what the first speaker does.

In this dialogue, Yan positions herself in an expert role. At the same time, Gong adopts the novice role (line 25-26), when the expert provides scaffolded help to enable him to realise the discrepancy between what is produced and acceptable. However, this relationship is not fixed, and line 28 illustrates how Yan views herself as a learner or novice while she perceives Wen as a more competent English user and expert. It's worth noting that the PowerPoint (PPT) slide performs a mediating role by facilitating a 'triadic interaction' (Van Lier, 2002) when both students have to look at the screen to resolve the linguistic problem at hand.

## Extract 2 (LRT)

- 77 Yan ((reading PPT slide)) So he is having a (.) it should be leading a *fu za de* (troubled) life (1.2)  
(troubled)
- 78 Gong leading a *fu za de* life how to say *fu za*?  
(troubled) (troubled)
- 79 Yan Not simple? (.) Wen?
- 80 Wen Yeah not simple but I think (.) *wo men xu yao yige yu qi qiang lie dian er de ci*  
(we need a strong word)
- 81 Yan uneasy
- 82 Wen No no not uneasy (1.2) it means uncomfortable (1.2) *wo men xu yao yi ge (.) bus hi jian dan de fan*  
83 *yi ci (.) jiu ta sheng huo de hen die dang de*  
(we need (.) not just an opposite word for simple as his life is unstable)
- 84 Gong Hard (.) no?
- 85 Wen No (1.2) he has a lot of trouble?
- 86 Yan Yeah (.) troublesome life? Troubled?
- 87 Gong /tru:bl/ some life
- 88 Wen No not troublesome *bu shi zhen dui bie ren (.) shi ta zi ji* (1.7)  
(not to others, it's about himself)  
I think troubled ((checking the online dictionary))
- 89 Gong /tru:bl/ ((mispronunciation))
- 90 Yan /'trabl/
- 91 Gong Oh /'trabl/ he /tru:bl/ /'trabl/ himself
- 92 Wen Yeah troubled (1.4) *wo cha le*  
(I've checked)

Extract 2 is another example of a language-related episode in which Gong seeks an appropriate word to express *fu za de* (troubled) (line 78). Yan provides an explanation of *fu za de* in L1, about which she is not certain. This is evidenced by her tone and the follow-up confirmation request with Wen (line 79). In response to a request for help, Wen first corrects Yan's definition

of *fu za de* in this context and emphasises the need for an alternative word (line 80). Wen seems to want to encourage her peers to think, which helps Yan generate a turn with the response: *uneasy* (line 81). Wen provides further assistance to explain why ‘uneasy’ is not the word they are searching for, and then she switches back to Yan’s initial explanation of *fu za de* (line 83). This helps Gong make another attempt (line 84), followed by a confirmation check (line 84). Wen recognises that her peers are still having problems, so she assists them through further elicitation (line 85), to which Yan responds with the words *troublesome* and *troubled*. Wen provides feedback and confirms the answer (line 88 and 93). Here, Wen takes an expert role by scaffolding her peers through the word-search task. However, Wen is uncertain about the accuracy of ‘troubled’ as she refers to the online dictionary, indicating her sense of responsibility as the expert. By doing so, Wen also creates a learning opportunity to mediate her learning with the online tool. The assumed and given responsibility of being the expert makes Wen the decision-maker in the collaborative work. Wen’s self-positioning as the expert in the group determines her orientation to the interaction and contributes to her learning. Such collaborative dialogue provides Wen and her peers a basis for monitoring and understanding, creating the platform for ongoing knowledge construction. It is also interesting to note that these participants are more comfortable using English in their discussion, and the L1 is used primarily for assisting lexical items.

## Extract 3 (CRT)

- 29 Yan: *Wo men zuo zhe ge me* (1.2)) Michael Jackson?  
(*is this what we are doing*)?
- 30 Wen: Yeah (.) WE agreed (0.5) AND it is easy (2.3)
- 31 Yan: *zen me ke neng a!*  
(*how possibly can it be*)
- 32 Wen: ((to Gong)) where do we start?
- 33 Gong: pictures um (2.3)
- 34 Wen: [Yes?
- 35 Yan: [Ok *na gan jin dong shou ba*  
(*Let's start*)

Extract 3 exemplifies a content-related episode. Yan requests clarification of the topic (line 29), which Wen confirms with justification and then closes the exchange (line 30). Yan seeks further justification (line 31) but is ignored by her peers as Wen initiates another turn to Gong (line 32). Gong takes Wen's cue to suggest a task procedure. Wen seeks more input from Gong (line 34) while Yan provides a supportive response to Gong's suggestion (line 35). Wen assumes the 'leadership' role here, and Yan has to 'reposition the self' to be included in the project.

## Extract 4 (CRT)

- 40 Wen: *bao kuo shen me ne?*  
(*what should be included?*)
- 41 Gong: *zhao pian* (1.0) *yin yue a*  
(*photos*) (*music*)
- 42 Wen: Yes (.) ((towards Yan)) but what we should talk about
- 43 Yan: [His music
- 44 Gong: [Jackson five
- 45 Wen: Ok (1.0) what else? (3.2) Maybe his childhood?
- 46 Gong: ok (.) good
- 47 ((Yan has been looking for information on the internet))
- 48 Yan: His fans
- 49 Wen: About what?
- 50 Yan: ((showing computer screen to Wen and Gong)) we can decide later

Extract 4 follows shortly after Extract 3. Wen poses a question, and Gong re-proposes his suggestion for including pictures and music (see Extract 3),



which Wen acknowledges (line 42). After a short pause, Wen then turns to Yan for a suggestion, serving as a social signal to include Yan in the project. Following this, both Yan and Gong make a suggestion, and a very topical proposal from Gong (line 44) shows his competence. Wen first approves both proposals (line 45), then after a longish pause (3.2s), she requests a further elicitation. This is followed by an extended silence and a recommendation from herself (line 45), to which Gong responds spontaneously. These strategies adopted by Wen are very much similar to what happens in teacher-fronted classroom discourse. Here, Wen takes the leadership role to assist her peers in constructing the ideas for their projects. Yan takes advantage of the internet to search for information and subsequently suggests a new idea (line 48), which Wen challenges (line 49). Yan, on this occasion, mediates her ideas through a shared screen (line 50).

## Extract 5 (TRT)

- |    |       |   |
|----|-------|---|
| 82 | Jin   | ((turning to Liang)) <i>£ni shi nan sheng£ (. ) ni hui ba?</i><br>(you are male so you can do this?)                      |
| 83 | Liang | <i>shen me?</i><br>(what)   |
| 84 | Jin   | <i>[zuo wang zhan a</i><br>(making a website)   |
| 85 | Na    | [Website  |
| 86 | Liang | <i>Wo kan yi xia</i> ((checking programs on the computer and showing them to his<br>(let me see)                          |
| 87 |       | peers)) <i>um zhe er you Dreamweaver (. ) frontpage zhe er hai you ne (. )</i><br>(there is) (there are other programmes) |
| 88 |       | <i>qi shi yong Word jiu xing</i><br>(In fact, Word is ok)   |
| 89 | Na    | ((to Liang)) Ok then Jin and me will write the essay and you do the webpage   |
| 90 | Liang | Ok (. ) I do it (1.2) ((starting to draw the structure on a piece of paper))  |
| 91 | Jin   | [webpage  |
| 92 | Na    | [Webpage (. ) £not on paper£  |
| 93 | Liang | Yeah (. ) ah (. ) the same  |

In Extract 5, Jin links their roles more closely to a possible gender stereotype by suggesting that Liang make a website for the project (line 82). Liang, on this occasion, checks the programs on the computer (line 86-87),

confirms (line 88) and gets on with a plan (90). It could be true that Na and Jin are more competent in English, and particularly Na acts as a TL expert among peers, but here multiple identities besides the TL expert or novice learners are revealed. In this extract, we can see Liang is viewed and recognised by his peers as a technology expert. Although not explicitly stated by anyone in the group, Liang is arguably also considered by his peers as a male student who should take responsibility for the technological task.

#### 4.2 About-task Talk

About-task talk is about the task or labour distribution procedure within the group and is similar to organisational talk (see Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009).

##### Extract 6 Distributing labour

- 35     Yan:     [Ok *na gan jin dong shou ba*  
                  (Let's start)
- 36     Wen:     *ni lai ba*  
                  (You do this)
- 37     Gong:     (1.0)    *wo lai zhao tu (.) Yan de ying yu bi wo hao*  
                                  (I will look for pictures(.) Yan's English is better than mine)
- 38     Wen        *you are more useful ni zhi dao de duo (you know more about the content) (0.8)*
- 39     Gong        *hao ba*  
                  (ok)

Extract 6, which directly follows Extract 3, displays labour distribution in a group. Wen takes the leadership role to assess members' ability and allocate work for individuals (line 36 & line 38). Unlike language-related talk, since the focus is placed on the content, the relationship between group members has changed. For example, Gong, who is weak in English subject (line 37), has now become the expert due to his content knowledge (line 38).

Li

## Extract 7 managing the task

- 189                      wo men xu yao xie dai biao yin yue  
                               (*we need some sample music*)
- 190      Jin:            ni men ying gai you bu shao a (1.4)  
                               (*you both should have a lot*)
- 191                      wo yin yue ke bu xing  
                               (*I am not good at music*)
- 192      Na:            Ok (.) wo ming tian dai xie CD lai  
                               (*I will bring some CDs tomorrow*) (.)
- 193                      jin er jiu jie su le ba (.)  
                               (*so that's it for today*) (1.3)
- 194                      kan xia zan men dou you shen me?  
                               (*let's see what we have so far*)?
- 195      Liang:        Wang shang xia zai jiu xing le  
                               (*we can download some from the internet*)
- 196      Jin            [dui ya  
                               (*exactly*)
- 197      Na            [Good idea

In Extract 7, Liang seems more confident about directing the project (line 189) in the L1, although he can probably manage the project in English. It is pertinent that across the projects, the students liked using the L1 to manage the task. In response to Liang's suggestion, Jin comments that this should be left to her peers as she knows nothing about music, thereby considering them both as music experts (line 190). Na takes the responsibility by suggesting that she will bring in some CDs and takes the leadership role to summarise their work (line 191). Liang countered her suggestion, who shows his expertise with technology by suggesting that they source the internet materials. This self-position of a proficient technology user is co-established by his peers (lines 195-196).

### 4.3 Off-task Talk

One common function of off-task talk is small talk. In most cases, off-task activities are conducted in the L1. Extract 9 is a rare example in the dataset of students' using both L1 and the target language.

Extract 8 joking

402	Wen	((pointing at the screen)) ((to Gong)) I like this one
403	Gong	I have at home (.)
404	Wen	A poster?
405	Gong	um!
406	Yan:	ni zhen shi chao fen er ( <i>you are such a super fan</i> )

Extract 8 is a small talk when Wen shares her viewpoint with Gong (line 402), as the latter is perceived as a Michael Jackson fan who initially suggested the project. Gong displays such an identity by acknowledging possessing a poster, which results in a joke from Yuan about him being a 'super fan' (line 406). This is one of the off-task moments when the group establishes inter-subjectivity, a vital component of effective collaboration. Here, students are mutually creating a learning environment, enabling them to stay engaged on the task.

## 5. Discussion and implications

This study attempted to examine the language use and group dynamics in a ProCALL classroom, to explore how students work together to complete the task and to determine what purpose they use L1 for specifically. In what follows, I will discuss students' language use and the nature of collaborative relationships.

### 5.1 Students' Language Use

Based on the results obtained in this particular investigation, it is evident that students are able to stay engaged and that language-related talk (LRT) is dominant. Similar language-related dialogues are observed in Jeon-Ellis et al.'s study (2005), indicating that students view all classroom activities as language acquisition opportunities, and the main objective of working

together is to practice their English. The current study reveals that ProCALL does not necessarily lead students to more use of the target language. In the observation of the two groups' interaction, the L1 is used frequently to assist TL learning (requesting, clarification, explanation, meaning checking), to manage the task, to search for lexical items and negotiate meaning, to maintain dialogue and to provide explanations and focus on form. This is in line with previous research findings (e.g., DiCamilla & Antón, 2012) and supports the view that the L1 could be used for private speech (Jiménez Jiménez, 2015). Students notably used L1 to tackle lexical problems, which is usually followed by verbatim repetition from the novice (Ha, 2017; Nukuto, 2017; Zhao & Macaro, 2016). It is clear that, at least in this particular context, the use of the L1 has been beneficial for learning and that group dynamics.

Research suggests that students' target language proficiency levels influence L1 use (DiCamilla & Antón, 2012; Dao & McDonough, 2017), and a widely accepted belief is that students of all proficiency levels favour the use of L1 (Chiou, 2014). This study suggests that students tend to switch back to their L1 for the social-relationship establishment or conducting off-tasks, despite their TL proficiency. Mori (2004) indicates that the spontaneous use of the L1 can be seen as an expression of the students' affective engagement in learning in language classrooms. A related and interesting observation from the study is that students tend to use the same language choice as the topic initiator. It seems that interlocutors viewed the use of the same language as *engagement* in the conversation. It is worth noting that Wen and Na both self-rated as proficient learners. They provided more assistance to their respective group peers in language learning and actively created opportunities to learn the subject knowledge. Given that both students had different language learning experiences from other students, it is

likely that prior learning experience might have affected their TL use or their attitude towards TL. Indeed, it would be interesting to go one step further and explore whether students' views on language is an influential factor.

## **5.2 Nature of Collaborative Relationships**

The extracts suggested the students orient themselves to such membership categories as friends, foreign language learners, music lovers, female and male students, and TL/technology experts and novices. The focus on lexical and phonological accuracy and the focus on the project content is different. The extracts suggest that the students situated themselves predominantly in a language learning process rather than content learning. The focus on meta-lingual matters rather than topical talk indicates that the nature of this collaboration is institutional talk, where the less proficient learners orient to the more proficient learner as TL experts. In both groups, the TL expert managed the activity and initially structured it on the model of teacher-fronted classroom discourse. In addition, they also defined what counted as "allowable contributions" (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 22) in this context, such as approving and disapproving of ideas (Extract 4) and orientation of the dialogue (Extracts 3, 6). This finding contributes to the existing literature that has demonstrated how peers can act as the expert to provide scaffolded help to the novice partner and how they work together to accomplish the task, which might otherwise be difficult if they work individually (Ohta, 2001). The evidence also suggests that the more proficient learners benefit from taking responsibility for monitoring and supporting their peers as they constantly check and consolidate their subject knowledge, thereby creating learning opportunities for themselves (e.g. Extract 2). In essence, the TL experts perform the role of a teacher in a classroom, who manages the direction and focus of the interaction (Li, 2017).

It is essential to realise that learning opportunities are created by learners jointly (Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Walsh & Li, 2013; Zhang Waring, 2011). The scaffolding process creates a space for developing both types of learners' zones of proximal development. It was evident from the participation in the activity that the individual learners shifted between roles throughout the project, based on the nature of the task different areas of expertise. For example, Gong positioned himself as the project leader and was viewed by his peers as a male student, good at technology and a Michael Jackson fan. The multiple roles revealed in this ProCALL task are usually be observed in traditional Chinese classrooms where students tend mostly to share a collective fixed role as a second language learner compared to their teacher whose primary role is knowledge-giver or transmitter through grammar-translation method (e.g. Wei, 2004). Due to the authenticity of the task, the participants could position themselves relevant to the social membership categories that existed outside of this specific interactional structure (e.g. as music lovers). The social membership reflected in institutional discourse and community contexts confirms that learning is a socially constructed process in which individuals negotiate and develop their identities.

Similarly, because individuals are associating and situating themselves with and in a specific context and performing different roles, they develop and shape the discourse and community context by engaging in the shared activity, which was their ProCALL task. The collaborative project arguably also gave the students new perspectives of what may be valued in learning, particularly in a language classroom. In this study, the expert was valued in linguistic terms and content and technological terms. Both Gong and Liang were viewed as experts in technology and play more significant roles than they would in traditional classrooms and therefore made more contributions.

In L2 learning, it is widely recognised a rich L2 environment is critical to maximise exposure to extensive L2 input. However, L1 has also been recognised as a valuable tool for instructions, classroom management (Nukuto, 2017) and interpersonal relationships (Tsagari & Diakou, 2015). Different pedagogical recommendations are emerging from this study. First, both teachers and learners need to be aware of the functions of the L1 in meaning construction and collaborative work. With this in mind, a key question for teachers is not whether students should be using the L1 in learning a second/foreign language but when and how they use it. For collaborative work, it is equally important for learners to know when and how to use the L1 to help them carry out the task. Students should be able to use their L1 as a resource in personal development (Conteh, 2018). As such, translanguaging strategies should be developed and promoted. As Shin et al. (2020) suggest, a greater understanding of translanguaging by students is required to enhance their communicative potential. Second, the field has recognized that students' L2 proficiency is a crucial factor contributing to the quantity and functional use of L1. What this student has revealed is that group dynamic is equally essential. It seems that establishing ground rules (in terms of language use) for collaborative work might be helpful, with specific guidance of the valuable role of L1. Third, traditional teacher education programmes focus mainly on developing teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, without much discussion on the value and function of the L1. I would concur with what Shin et al. (2020, p. 414) argue, "[t]he value of L1 use cannot be understood in isolation, but needs to take into account connections with a pedagogical focus to support L2 learning". More specifically, "the amount of L1 use should be judged by its purpose, content, and task styles when considering how to support L2 learning" (ibid). In this



regard, teachers would benefit from a more systematic understanding of the theories and practices of the L1 so that they can become active decision-makers and active agents who make judicious use of the L1.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the language use and group dynamics in a PrOCALL classroom from a sociocultural perspective of language learning. This article focuses on how different groups of learners use languages in a collaborative project by providing fine-grained analysis of different types of talk. The findings suggest that L1 has been considered a powerful tool by the learners, although they have displayed a clear identity as L2 learners. The extracts also showed how participants co-constructed knowledge, managed learning activities in their professional context and enacted different roles that are not common in a language classroom. With the cautionary note that the extracts reported here cannot be assumed to generalise the talk of the whole class, the study does contribute to the existing literature on the mechanisms to which learners resort when engaged in collaborative tasks, i.e. L1 and group dynamics. At the language level, this study illustrates how different types of talk, namely, the institutionally assigned task of completing a (self-chosen) project and the voluntarily generated ‘off task’ activities, are socially constructed in completing the task. Technology-supported collaborative projects, such as those described here, create opportunities for an authentic language use environment and a learning opportunity for using TL and the effective use of the L1. From a sociocultural perspective, a variety of studies suggest that the use of L1 is beneficial for language learning. L1 is a cognitive and psychological tool that enables learners to construct effective collaborative dialogue in completing a shared task, providing scaffolded help, establishing inter-subjectivity and conducting private speech. (e.g., Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009, Jiménez Jiménez, 2015; Nukuto, 2017; Yu & Lee, 2016). This study confirms similar functions of L1 when students used L1 to manage tasks, assign roles, check the target

language meaning, get their meaning across (L1 as a mediator), facilitate peers (scaffolding) and perform social functions (e.g., joking). The multifunctioning of the L1 helps to create opportunities for foreign language learners to become potential and actual TL users in real-life situations. This observation should be of interest to language teachers in EFL contexts to reflect upon their beliefs about focusing on form and the exclusive use of the target language in student interaction.

Equally, this authentic, collaborative project provided learners with more opportunities to support and scaffold each other, which might interest language teachers and researchers who wish to explore the affordances of technology in peer work. Nevertheless, whether guided use of L1 and the potentials of technology can facilitate students to grasp the target language more effectively remains unexplored. Future research may examine any trade-off between using L1, collaborative knowledge development and L2 learning. To conclude, if we are to understand how students use languages as cognitive and psychological tools in technology-supported collaborative work and how they learn the language through joint talk, there is an urgent need for a more qualitative analysis of learners' interactions at the computer.

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Li

### Appendix A: Transcription conventions

*Italic* -Chinese transcription

(*italic*)- translation

? -rising intonation - question or other

((pointing at the screen)) - comments from the researcher

(.)- pause of one second or less

(1.7/0.4)- silence; length given in seconds

WHAT- emphatic speech

King-capitals are only used for proper nouns and names

£ -smiley voice

/tru:b/-pronunciation

=-turn latching: one turn followed by another speaker without any  
pause

! -falling intonation

[yeah

[Good idea- overlap between two speakers



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